
AI translation · View original & related papers at
chinaxiv.org/items/chinaxiv-202304.00745

Reflections on Library Marketing in the Post-Print Era from the “Reader Message at Dongguan Library” Incident

Authors: Li Donglai, Zhu Ji

Date: 2023-04-01T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Effective communication can stimulate and enhance marketing effectiveness, and analyzing specific marketing cases deepens the understanding of library marketing. [Method/Process] Taking the Dongguan Library reader message incident during the 2020 Dragon Boat Festival as a case study, this paper reconstructs the entire communication process of the event, highlights the importance of industry media in library marketing communication, and drawing on the communication studies concept of “agenda setting,” explores how libraries and industry media can conduct regular marketing activities through communication topic setting and content planning. [Results/Conclusion] The professional capability of libraries is the fundamental prerequisite for library marketing, systematic planning of industry media communication content is an effective approach to guiding public attention toward libraries, and collective efforts from peers constitute a strong guarantee for maximizing marketing effectiveness.

Full Text

Preamble

Volume 65, Issue 1, January 2021

ChinaXiv Partner Journal

Reflections on Library Marketing from the “Reader’s Message to Dongguan Library” Event

Li Donglai, Zhu Ji

Dongguan Library, Dongguan 523071

Abstract:

[Purpose/Significance] Effective dissemination stimulates and enhances marketing outcomes, and analyzing specific marketing cases deepens our understanding of library marketing. [Method/Process] Using the reader's message event at Dongguan Library during the 2020 Dragon Boat Festival as a case study, this paper reconstructs the entire dissemination process, highlights the importance of professional media in library marketing communication, and explores how libraries and professional media can conduct regular marketing work through communication topic setting and content planning by drawing on the communication studies concept of "agenda setting." [Result/Conclusion] Professional competence is the fundamental prerequisite for library marketing; systematic planning of communication content by professional media is an effective way to guide public attention to libraries; and peer cohesion is a powerful guarantee for maximizing marketing effectiveness.

Keywords: reader's message; communication studies; professional media; library marketing

Classification Number: G258

DOI: 10.13266/j.issn.0252-3116.2021.01.011

On June 24, 2020, a reader's message at Dongguan Library sparked nationwide discussion. From the event's occurrence on the 24th to its explosive spread across the internet on the 25th, the speed could only be described as lightning-fast. As one of the main subjects of the event, Dongguan Library was passively thrust into the public spotlight. We were not surprised by the event itself, as encouraging departing readers to leave messages in our guestbook is merely routine basic work for librarians. However, we were astonished by its viral fermentation—an inadvertent action had triggered such sensational discussion. We were gratified by its impact, as it led to society's renewed recognition of library values, rekindled reading enthusiasm, and drew special attention to social groups—all outcomes we had hoped for.

1. Literature Review on Library Marketing and Introduction to Communication Theory

1.1 Literature Review on Library Marketing

Library marketing began earlier abroad. In 1977, Professor Lawrence C. Lawrence from Queen's University in Canada proposed that libraries, though public resources, could also engage in marketing [1]. Foreign research on library marketing primarily concentrates on four aspects: theory, strategy, case analysis, and effectiveness evaluation. For instance, J.E. Rowley and C. Baldock introduced marketing concepts [2] and noted that librarians should possess marketing competencies [3]. D. Langford proposed establishing brand value for libraries [4], while C. Chan demonstrated that Twitter could improve library collection utilization [5]. Some studies advocate for a reader-centered approach [6], while others suggest conducting qualitative assessments of library

marketing through user feedback and performance models [7]. Overall, the foreign research system on library marketing has basically matured with relatively high professional standards.

Domestic research on library marketing started later. A CNKI search using “library marketing” as the subject shows that relevant papers began to be published in 1993, with literature gradually increasing after 2000, rapidly rising to over 30 articles in 2003, and reaching 101 articles in 2017. In terms of research content, domestic studies mainly focus on four aspects: the meaning of library marketing, its necessity, challenges, and strategies. Early research concentrated on explaining the concept, with most scholars arguing that library marketing aims to meet reader needs—not pursuing profit like corporate marketing, but rather seeking service benefits [8]. Some scholars also pointed out that libraries need appropriate marketing to consolidate their status as cultural inheritance centers [9]. Later, research on marketing strategies gradually increased, such as applying key elements and model frameworks from marketing theory to establish library marketing models and feedback mechanisms [10], with some scholars believing that brand marketing is the key to competitive success [11]. Numerous studies have identified problems such as insufficient marketing awareness, monotonous methods, and imperfect mechanisms [12], proposing countermeasures like strengthening internal construction and open cooperation [13].

1.2 Introduction to Communication Theory

Library marketing differs from corporate marketing. While enterprises can conduct marketing through advertising and promotional activities, libraries—given their non-profit, public welfare nature and limited marketing investment—primarily rely on publicity as their main marketing method and approach. By authentically disseminating their own service information and resource information, libraries can segment readers and conduct marketing activities according to their different needs, enabling more of the public to understand libraries and better utilize library resources, thereby achieving the goal of meeting public needs. Therefore, effective dissemination can enhance marketing effectiveness, and analyzing marketing cases can help us better understand library marketing.

Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs proposed the concept of “agenda setting” in 1972, pointing out that mass communication often cannot determine people’s specific views on an event or opinion, but can effectively influence which facts and opinions people pay attention to and the order in which they discuss them by providing information and arranging relevant topics. In other words, mass media has the special function of setting the “agenda” for the public, and media programming of an agenda affects the public’s perception and judgment of its importance [14]. As professional media for library information dissemination, library and information science professional media have unique advantages in dissemination content and effects. Through systematic and continuous information dissemination or activity organization, they can guide public attention to library development, gradually influence public impressions and evaluations of

libraries, and thereby achieve library value transmission and service promotion.

2. Timeline of Event Dissemination

2.1 The Beginning—Interpersonal Communication

Reader messages occur daily. Wu Guichun's expression of reluctance during the card cancellation process and the love for the library revealed between the lines of his message in the guestbook deeply moved the librarians. Every word he wrote helped us more deeply appreciate the value and role of libraries as "important places for nourishing national spirit and cultivating cultural confidence," leading to natural dissemination through word-of-mouth among librarians in work groups and offices—spontaneous communication triggered by genuine emotion. On the afternoon of June 24, this photo quickly circulated in Dongguan Library's internal groups. Amidst the atmosphere of being moved and gratified, the librarians had no idea that this act of dissemination was brewing a hot event that would cause a national sensation.

2.2 Fermentation—Integrated Media Communication

In the internet era, dissemination effects are often beyond the control of the disseminating subject. On the evening of June 24, Wang Yuan from Tsinghua University Library received the forwarded reader's message to Dongguan Library in her social circle, and she sensitively realized that "Dongguan Library has broken through the circle"—the message event had moved beyond the library professional circle into social circles. At 9:48 AM on June 25, Douban user Xenophon posted text stating "reading still has some meaning" along with a photo of Wu Guichun's message to Dongguan Library. Subsequently, Weibo influencers gradually began forwarding the image. At this point, discussion of Wu Guichun's message photo was no longer confined to the library industry; it had evolved from internal interpersonal communication to external dissemination through self-media platforms, with the disseminating subject shifting from event participants to other members of the public. The methods, breadth, and speed of information dissemination in the internet era are incomparable to any previous era. Traditional media immediately joined in. At 8:47 AM on June 26, *People's Daily* published a commentary titled "Let the Fragrance of Books Become a City's Greatest Attachment." That evening, CCTV's "News 1+1" launched a special report titled "A Library, A Reader, A City." With the participation of self-media and traditional media, the entire event entered a state of integrated communication, with dissemination speed and attention levels continuing to rise. A message photo triggered a national sensation. As one of the main subjects of the event, Dongguan Library naturally could not be absent. Dongguan Library's official Weibo account also responded to reader Wu Guichun's message on June 25: "Thank you, we are always here, waiting for your return!"

2.3 In-depth Exploration—Traditional Media Communication

The topic of “reader’s message to Dongguan Library” generated over 30 discussion threads within a week, with more than 1 billion views. From central to local levels, from online to print and radio/television, mainstream media basically covered the story, and competition among various media for interviews was fierce, competing for timeliness and employing various tactics, allowing us librarians to truly experience the professionalism of media practitioners. In the internet era, the heat of hot events often lasts only a few days or even hours. This message event, which made the public 重新认识 libraries, was no exception, with discussion heat gradually cooling after the 27th and basically fading from public view after a week. However, in-depth reporting on the event did not end. The dissemination that began on the 25th focused on introducing the event’s process, while after the heat dissipated, it was time to reflect on social development and the value and responsibility of libraries behind the event.

On June 29, *Library and Information Service* magazine launched a special report on “The Value and Mission of Public Libraries,” publishing seven articles: “Libraries: Warmth and Hope,” “Libraries: Spiritual Homes for Vulnerable Groups,” “Libraries: Engines of Social Development,” “Libraries: Why Readers Are So Reluctant to Part,” “Libraries: Illuminating the Light of Reading,” “Libraries: Important Infrastructure for Lifelong Learning,” and “Libraries: What Relies on Reader Recognition.” Using the Wu Guichun reader message event as a starting point, the magazine convened experts and colleagues in the library and information science field to discuss the value and mission of libraries, enabling the public to understand libraries more comprehensively. The main content and several aspects of the special planning well reflected the depth of the library industry’s cognition. All seven articles were completed and launched on the online platform within a week, effectively demonstrating the timeliness of professional media’s follow-up on hot events and bringing about changes in professional media itself under the integrated media environment, guiding subsequent social reports to 重新认识 the existence and social value of libraries. Subsequently, Guangdong Provincial Sun Yat-sen Library planned and collaborated with *Library Tribune* to launch a professional discussion on “Reader’s Message to Dongguan Library,” including both industry conferences such as “Nourishing the Soul, Highlighting Value—A Discussion on Reader’s Message to Dongguan Library” and over thirty special articles, nearly ten of which were written by frontline librarians, perfectly embodying authenticity and timeliness.

In July, *People* magazine author An Xiaoqing published a feature article on Wu Guichun, which won the Guyu Public Welfare Writing Award for that month. The author stated that writing this article aimed to clarify three questions: Why did the story happen to Wu Guichun? Why did it occur at Dongguan Library? Why did it take place in the Pearl River Delta? The article’s entry point or perspective had three layers: the first layer was Wu Guichun, representing migrant workers and elderly migrant worker groups; the second layer was the library—Dongguan Library and the public library industry it belongs to;

the third layer was the city—Dongguan as a landing city, the world’s factory, and the Pearl River Delta behind it. This in-depth report on the Wu Guichun event was not a simple restoration of the event; it allowed us to feel the library’s sentiment and self-innovation, as well as the temperature and inclusiveness of the Pearl River Delta. The depth and breadth of traditional media are incomparable to self-media, and subsequent news reports and special features explained to the audience the essential reasons for the event’s occurrence and revealed its internal inevitability.

3. The Foundation of Event Dissemination—Authenticity

3.1 The Reader’s Genuine Emotions

The 131 words that so moved the librarians contained no ornate rhetoric or even much emotional fluctuation—only ordinary language and genuine feelings. These included love and attachment to books, as well as gratitude and blessings to the library—all were Wu Guichun’s most authentic emotional expressions at that moment. It was this simple and purest sentiment that touched the librarians and moved the public.

3.2 The Librarian’s Genuine Service

Collecting reader feedback is a basic requirement for libraries to gather reader opinions and suggestions, allowing us to see our work deficiencies and gain strength from reader encouragement. Seeing reader Wu Guichun’s reluctance to part, librarian Wang Yanjun hoped he could leave something in our guestbook, allowing Dongguan Library to retain a trace of reader Wu Guichun and enabling his 不舍 emotions to remain at Dongguan Library. This message could become a perfect conclusion to the fate between Wu Guichun and Dongguan Library over the years. She never imagined that this basic library professional quality and work requirement—a small act that could hardly be called service—would trigger subsequent hot discussions.

3.3 Authentic Dissemination of the Event

From the event’s occurrence to its fermentation, we didn’t have a minute to plan. We passively accepted various reports, interviews, and even commentaries. Being pushed to the “cusp of the storm” brought not joy but tension and anxiety. After the event fermented, the principle we consistently upheld was: truthful expression and authentic communication. In the internet era, we cannot control public opinion direction; what we can do is restore the event, clarify facts at the first moment, record truthfully, handle emergencies according to emergency response plans, and maintain library frontline services.

The dissemination media for this event shifted from initial interpersonal communication to new media communication and traditional media communication, ultimately forming integrated communication across multiple media. The event’s

content did not change, but different communication media produced different dissemination effects. Therefore, the choice of communication media cannot be underestimated in library marketing and promotion. According to different needs for dissemination depth and breadth, different media can be selected. For example, when libraries conduct marketing targeting the general public, due to factors such as wide age spans and varying education levels, dissemination content should be lively, relaxed, and easy to understand, and media should be selected from new media platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin that most of the public frequently use daily, in order to effectively improve dissemination speed. The use of new media also provides the possibility for interactive information exchange between libraries and the public. Professional media can also choose communication media based on content when conducting marketing work—articles with lower professionalism and shorter length are suitable for release on new media platforms to fit the public’s fragmented reading habits, while articles with strong professionalism and longer length are more suitable for print media, facilitating professionals’ recording of key content and data retrieval.

4. The Importance of Professional Media

The Wu Guichun reader message event was just one of thousands of daily social news stories. Public media focuses on authenticity and timeliness. Professional media demonstrated differences from public media communication during this event’s dissemination process, showcasing their importance in promoting the development of the library industry.

4.1 Professional Dissemination Content

According to statistics, no fewer than 25 media outlets reported on this reader message event, with most reports remaining at the “5W Model” (the “5W Model” was proposed by H. Lasswell in 1948 in *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society* [15])—explaining to the audience when, where, what, why, and who. In-depth reports revealing the essence of the event and exploring derived issues were rare. Public media only provided simple reports meeting basic news communication elements, lacking professionalism and depth. The importance of professional media communication lies in its use of the most professional perspective to clarify the essence of what happened, leveraging authoritative and professional advantages to provide the public with comprehensive and clear-depth interpretations—professionalism, authority, and organization that public media lack. Professional media transmits library value in information dissemination and occupies a unique position in the communication arena.

4.2 Diverse Dissemination Effects

Public media reports on this event were relatively single in content selection, allowing the public only to understand the event's process. Professional media, however, focused not on the ins and outs but on the deeper implications behind the event, resulting in diverse communication effects.

First, for the general public, professional media reports helped them understand the fundamental reasons behind the event. The seven consecutive articles published by *Library and Information Service* explained to the public that this seemingly “accidental” event was actually “inevitable,” transmitting the existence value of libraries from the perspective of library value and mission. By launching first on WeChat public accounts, the timeliness gap with public media was not significant.

Second, for the library industry itself, these seven articles from *Library and Information Service* served as both sharing and encouragement for library practitioners. This internal emotional encouragement and sharing exchange is something public media reports cannot provide. *Library Tribune* further expanded the scope and field of professional sharing, while *Library Development* also used this opportunity to reorganize its previously conducted “Urban Libraries” special topic, reflecting the internal reasons for news 爆 points in the long course of time. Internal communication and exchange can effectively promote the common development of the industry and the self-confidence and pride of library practitioners.

4.3 Obvious Dissemination Advantages

Regarding the dissemination of hot events, public media typically does not adopt long-term continuous reporting due to timeliness constraints. Professional media, however, possesses data theoretical resources and expert team strength that public media cannot compare with. In this event's dissemination, professional media did not prioritize timeliness but effectively utilized its own advantages to achieve the “agenda setting” effect in communication studies through planned series reports. *Library and Information Service* and *Library Tribune* conducted serial reports on WeChat public accounts, standing out in this event's communication forms. Serial reports can actively guide audience attention to the event and stimulate thinking, arousing great public concern for the library industry. Moreover, each article's author is an industry expert, and analysis from an expert perspective is inevitably more attractive than the writing perspective of most public media's ordinary journalists.

5. Reflections on Library Marketing

5.1 Professional Work is Fundamental

The saying “good wine needs no bush” highlights that the “wine” is the foundation and core. The “wine” represents the library's own condition and work.

The foundation of library marketing remains its professional work, and professional service is the touchstone for testing library work. The “wine aroma” is reflected in three aspects: First, literature services and activity services—whether reader learning and reading needs are met, whether digital resources are updated timely, and whether reading promotion is successful are all manifestations of library professionalism. Second, librarians’ professional qualities directly affect readers’ service experiences. Only by doing our own work well do we have the capital and confidence for marketing. Third, characteristic resource construction. The development of libraries in the new era cannot be separated from characteristic collection resources and service system construction. Emphasizing characteristic collection resource construction is one of the important manifestations of library innovative development.

In the new era, society has put forward higher requirements and greater expectations for libraries in professional fields, such as providing personalized services through user classification, playing a think tank reference role to assist urban innovative development, connecting enterprises and communities to cultivate knowledge-based urban builders, etc. Library professional work is not limited to serving individual readers but extends to enterprise groups and urban development. Only by doing professional work well can libraries possess the qualification for marketing promotion and the possibility of being recognized by the public.

5.2 Professional Media is Crucial

In the new era context, public libraries continuously transform to meet readers’ diverse and personalized reading needs, while professional media also continuously utilize new media technology to expand dissemination scope and influence, shifting from previous internal academic research to “internal academic research + external communication platforms.” This is necessary for the sustainable development of professional media and the library industry. In the integrated media era, information dissemination involves not only diversified platforms but also new requirements for content—not simply moving traditional print content to new media platforms but updating content selection and language expression. The serial reports of *Library and Information Service* and *Library Tribune* on WeChat public accounts presented more vivid, intuitive, and rich forms to the public in terms of both serial topic selection and article language, effectively attracting public attention. From this event’s dissemination effects, we can see that public media can expand the breadth of event dissemination, while professional media can deepen its depth. Professional media’s excavation of the event’s essence and connotation is the main channel for explaining the inevitability of the event’s occurrence, and its role in library value dissemination and marketing is irreplaceable by public media.

5.2.1 Be Present, Seize Timeliness Public media’s ability to grasp timeliness and 挖掘 hot spots behind events is unmatched by library professional media.

However, when facing hot events within the industry, professional media and library peers should be present, actively participate, and change from passive to active. The timely participation and intervention of professional media and institutions this time seized an excellent opportunity for dialogue between the library industry and society. Although timeliness was slightly later than public media, compared with the past, the initiative of professional media participation is obvious, and active participation from peers also demonstrates the organization and solidarity of the entire library industry. As the public's emphasis on public cultural services deepens, we cannot predict how many more sudden hot events will occur, but what we can do is face each emergency without absence, strengthen public relations awareness, and actively communicate. *Library and Information Service* launched the “Public Library Value and Mission” special report on its WeChat public account, serializing seven articles, while *Library Tribune* also first published articles on online platforms. These are the best examples of using new media means to seize timeliness—first releasing on online media, then finalizing in print media, interpreting the event at deeper levels during the time fermentation point, better meeting audience needs, and successfully disseminating the library industry's voice on this event to the public through new media platforms. How professional media changes past communication methods to enhance interaction with society and exert media platform functions in the new era is a good test indicator and an embodiment of media transformation and progress.

5.2.2 Build Image, Showcase Value Zhang Weilin and Chen Youhua, using *People's Daily* library-related reports as research objects, summarized six contemporary media images of libraries: spiritual haven and knowledge paradise, marginalized reading place, organization with internal and external troubles, integrated and shared cultural service platform, organic body growing in the digital wave, and third space integrating work and life [16]. However, what image libraries hold in the public mind, and how large the gap is between the image libraries project and what readers expect, are precisely what we need to explore and strive for. With continuous social development, the environment and requirements for public cultural development have undergone new changes. The nation and citizens attach increasing importance to libraries, presenting new challenges and opportunities for library development, making the dissemination of library image and value particularly important. Through image and value transmission, we can not only expand reader groups to better realize libraries' social value but also attract more resources and support for library development, creating a better development environment and forming a virtuous cycle. This event made social media focus on libraries once again, allowing contemporary library image and value to be recognized and examined under the social media spotlight, while professional media's active intervention enabled libraries' deeper values to be explained.

5.2.3 Emphasize Planning, Focus on Context Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs' 1972 "agenda setting" theory tells us that the order of providing information and topic selection can guide and change people's focus. Emphasizing the planning of dissemination content can ensure logical consistency and maximize dissemination effects. Library professional media should utilize time nodes and hot events for relevant thematic conception, integrate stories behind libraries, and demonstrate deeper and more elevated content to audiences through series planning, arousing public resonance and thereby promoting library industry development. Library marketing promotion cannot rely solely on hot events; libraries and professional media can formulate annual marketing themes and then expand horizontally when developing specific dissemination content, combining library background stories with current activities and information promotion to form dynamic yet profound dissemination content that attracts the public to take interest and proactively learn about libraries.

5.2.4 Seek Consensus, Maintain High Standards The uniqueness of professional media dissemination lies in its different perspective and analytical depth compared with public media. Professional media possesses the broadest data theoretical resources and the most authoritative expert interpretations. When major events occur within the industry, the most critical aspect is how to organize and utilize these advantages to achieve industry consensus, form industry cohesion, and organize industry planning to produce series content with both height and foresight, demonstrating the library industry's unique topic selection angles and values.

References

- [1] LAWRENCE C. Libraries: a marketable resource [J]. Canadian library journal, 1977, 17(2): 24-26.
- [2] ROWLEY J E. From storekeeper to salesman: implementing the marketing concept in libraries [J]. Library review, 1995, 44(1): 72-75.
- [3] BALDOCK C. Marketing libraries: a survival course [J]. Library management, 1993, 14(1): 14-19.
- [4] LANGFORD D. Re-branding academic libraries in tough times: attracting students through marketing [J]. Strategic direction, 2010, 9(3): 41-44.
- [5] CHAN C. Marketing the academic library with online social network advertising [J]. Library management, 2012, 33(8/9): 479-489.
- [6] JONES T. Why take a reader-centered approach [EB/OL]. [2020-12-19]. <http://www.openingthebook.com/archive/branching-out>.
- [7] TRAIN B, ELKIN F. "Measuring the unmeasurable": reader development and its impact on performance measurement in the public library sector [J]. Library review, 2001, 50(6): 18-24.
- [8] OU Yuxin. Discussion on introducing public relations and marketing into libraries [J]. Theory Guide, 2006(6): 25-39.
- [9] HU Guofang. On the integration of marketing concepts and public relations in libraries [J]. Agricultural Library and Information Science Journal, 2004(12):

46-48.

- [10] LIU Yijun. Research on the application of 4R marketing strategy in public library nationwide reading activities [J]. Journal of Sichuan Library Science, 2016(6): 48-51.
- [11] REN Yongfang. WTO and library brand marketing [J]. Library Work and Research, 2003(5): 55-56.
- [12] FANG Hao. Challenges and coping strategies for public library marketing in China [J]. Think Tank Era, 2017(9): 164-165.
- [13] NING Yang. New exploration of public library marketing practice [J]. Library Science Journal, 2015, 37(2): 16-18.
- [14] GUO Qingguang. Communication Studies Tutorial [M]. Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2011.
- [15] LASSWELL H. The structure and function of communication in society [A]// BRYSON L. The communication of ideas. New York: The Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1948.
- [16] ZHANG Weilin, CHEN Youhua. Construction of contemporary library media image: a case study of People's Daily reports from 2009-2018 [J]. Library Tribune, 2020, 40(1): 96-104.

Author Contributions:

Li Donglai: Conceived the research 思路, wrote and revised the paper;
Zhu Ji: Collected and analyzed materials, wrote the initial draft.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.